

Finding Management Principles of Leadership, Power, and Influence in the Story of Esther: A Faith Integration Assignment

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ABSTRACT: This paper describes an assignment for a principles of management course which connects the leadership principles of power and influence and the story of Esther. Students are required to apply power/influence concepts, including sources of power, contingencies, influence tactics, and followers' response to two main characters in the Esther story. Students then apply those concepts to a contemporary leader, preferably a personal acquaintance of theirs. The hope is that students will develop application skills and also discover that contemporary management principles are evident in biblical literature. Ideas are also shared for adapting this assignment to other management courses and other biblical characters.

INTRODUCTION

In a recent address, Dr. Alister McGrath (2012) said, "A great challenge lies ahead. How can we bring our faith to the life of the academy? How can God continue to be found at Harvard? At Oxford? At wherever we have the privilege of teaching or researching?" It's a compelling question and one that many Christian universities are taking seriously with their commitment to the integration of faith and learning (IFL). Indeed, IFL is a driving force which informs the Christian university mission, faculty recruitment, program design, curriculum development, and organizational goals for many Christian universities. Statements from CCCU schools include explicit commitment to Christian higher education which focuses on educating the whole person while integrating faith and learning. Business schools also have stated explicitly their commitments to such learning. It is in this context that Christian professors are often seeking meaningful ways to design courses and assignments which highlight this important IFL commitment. Given that faith integration is a central tenant for many Christian universities and professors, this paper offers a practical pedagogical exercise to reinforce such learning for undergraduate business students early in their university experience.

PURPOSE AND RATIONALE

The purpose of this paper is to offer a creative way for students to consider the principles of leadership, power, and influence in the story of Esther in the Old Testament and to apply those principles to a contemporary leader. The assignment was designed for an undergraduate, principles of management (or comparable introduction to management) course, but could be adapted to upper-level courses, as described below. The assignment may be especially of interest to new faculty members who are working to build a "tool box" of creative assignments.

As an introductory course in the undergraduate business curriculum, principles of management is an ideal place to introduce the integration of faith and learning. A quick review of several course syllabi for principles of management courses reveals a number of commonly held objectives for the course. Broadly, most place an emphasis on learning the purposes, functions, and history of management. In this course, certain topics which are universally included are decision-making, strategy, teamwork, and leadership, with leadership being connected to the study of power and influence. The assignment described in this paper specifically targets the introduction to power sources and the use of

influence. As a foundational course in undergraduate business education, principles of management coverage of topics is typically broad and shallow. It's an introduction, after all. For every chapter in the textbook, the professor can honestly tell the students, "You can spend a whole semester on this topic alone. You can major in it; you can get a master's degree in it; you can even get a PhD in this topic. So, please know we are just getting started." Even with the introductory nature of the course, it is possible for the Christian professor to integrate faith and the topic at hand without giving superficial treatment to either the management topic or Scripture. The danger of trivializing Scripture by treating it too lightly and also the potential for taking Scripture out of context are two IFL problems to avoid. This exercise helps to circumvent those problems by allowing the Scriptural story to stand on its own and for students to apply clearly stated management concepts to the story.

The author finds several reasons for such an assignment. First, through this exercise students learn the basic management concepts of leadership, power, and influence (to be explored below in the description of the assignment). Students may well have some notion of what makes an effective leader, and they may have an idea of the concept of power based on their personal observations and experience. But most undergraduates have room to grow in their full understanding of where power comes from, the different types of power, the subtle difference between power and influence, the uses of power, and so forth. This exercise is a vehicle to teach those basic concepts and immediately see them applied. It is hoped that this specific application will make sense to the students and ensure more complete learning of the theoretical concepts. Second, students are required to apply their knowledge of those basic concepts to the biblical story of Esther. It provides a practical way to further the integration of faith and learning. This author has found a wide range of biblical literacy among university students. Some have studied Esther in-depth while others have never heard of Esther. Whatever their former knowledge of this story, this author has found that students like it. It resonates with students with the interesting characters, a plot, action, and drama. Part of the value of this assignment is to get students to thoughtfully read this portion of the Old Testament and learn how God operates in people's lives. It also gives students a concrete example to use to apply the concepts of power and influence that they have just begun to learn. Third, this assignment requires students to apply the concepts to a contemporary leader. This author has found that students often have a good intuitive sense about the effective or ineffective use of power through their own personal experiences with bosses, coaches, pastors,

youth ministers, and others. In this assignment, students explore those observations in much more detail and discover theoretical concepts at work. For many, in an introductory course, this very discovery is surprising and meaningful in their education. That is, they often are intrigued to learn that theoretical concepts from class can be so clearly identified in real life. Fourth, this assignment allows for multiple levels of application and creates an opportunity for students to practice their critical thinking skills. After applying the concepts to both a biblical story and a contemporary situation, students typically have a grasp of power and influence concepts. Going further, the assignment requires students to consider how effective (or not) the characters were in using power and also how well they pleased God in their use of power. It is this author's observation that students begin to learn to evaluate characters and situations using an accurate understanding of the relevant vocabulary and concepts rather than relying totally on their "gut feeling" about it. Through this assignment, students often discover for themselves that how people use power matters to God. Fifth, this assignment is interdisciplinary in nature as it requires students to consider elements of business management, leadership, history, and biblical studies, simultaneously. It satisfies a commitment to a liberal arts education even for professional schools. A discussion of Esther's story can open the door to a quick history lesson and geography lesson, as the professor sees fit. It provides an opportunity to connect lessons from various classes and life itself. And finally, the assignment allows a degree of personal application and customization so that students of all levels of Christian commitment or spirituality can engage meaningfully with the material. In this author's experience, students have responded favorably and have indicated that this is educationally, professionally, personally, and spiritually useful to them.

DESCRIPTION OF ASSIGNMENT

The study of Esther in the Old Testament is an excellent choice for the study of leadership, particularly the foundational concepts of power sources and tactics. The story is interesting and easy to understand. Typically, this professor reads a summary of the Esther story in class and then requires students to read the full biblical account on their own. After the students have read it, class discussion includes a review of trait, behavioral, and contingency approaches to the study of leadership. Class discussion then moves to the study of power and influence.

The lecture prior to this assignment includes discussion on the following four areas of power and influence: sources

of power, contingencies, influence tactics, and follower responses. Textbook definitions of power (for example, Daft, 2014; Gulati et al., 2013; McShane & VonGlinow, 2010; Colquitt et al., 2011) generally define power as the potential ability or capacity to influence behavior and attitudes of others, as individuals or in groups (Mintzberg, 1983; Pfeffer, J., 1981; Zaleznik & Kets de Vries, 1985; French & Raven, 1959). Influence is often described as the means, behavior or actual effects of using power (Somech & Drach-Zahavy, 2002; Strahelski & Paynton, 1995; Pfeffer, 1992). So, power and influence are closely connected but not synonymous. Many draw on French and Raven's (1959) sources of power for an introduction to power and influence. Those sources of power include legitimate, reward, coercive, expert, and referent. In this author's experience, undergraduate students are quick to grasp the meaning of these sources of power and can easily find examples of each one. The study of power sources naturally leads to a discussion of the contingencies of power which are those conditions which strengthen or reduce one's ability to exercise his or her power. Four contingencies highlighted in this assignment are centrality, visibility, substitutability, and discretion (Hickson et al., 1971; Hinings et al., 1974; Salancik & Pfeffer, 1977; Kanter, 1979). In this author's experience, students are not as quick to understand these constructs, so explanations are needed with concrete examples of each. Power and influence is readily seen in the tactics used by the person with power. While there is not one single list of tactics, some reasonable general lists are included in the Daft (2014) and Colquitt et al. (2011) textbooks. The effective use of various tactics has been explored in a number of studies (Kipnis et al., 1980; Rao & Hashimoto, 1997; McFarland et al., 2002) if the professor wishes to seek out additional information on compiling a tactics list. When power sources, contingencies, and tactics have all been explored, there still remains the followers' response. Common categories for response included internalization or engagement, compliance, and resistance (Yukl, 2002; Somech & Drach-Zahavy, 2002).

The assignment requires a written paper consisting of two sections (see Appendix). First (Part I), students are to analyze the power and influence of two characters from the Esther story. Second (Part II), they are to analyze the power and influence of a contemporary, personal acquaintance. For Part I in the assignment, students are expected to select two main characters in the Old Testament story (Esther, Mordecai, King Ahasuerus, or Haman) and describe each one's use of power and influence. Specifically, they are to identify and discuss the two characters' sources of power, contingencies of power, influence tactics, and followers'

response. Typically, students immediately see an important contrast between the two characters they have analyzed. Students vary in their choices and application of the concepts, but some patterns have emerged. When analyzing Esther, students often note that she possesses personal referent power and eventually learns that the contingency of centrality is present in her situation. Sometimes students will mention that she has legitimate power by her position as the queen, but that position does not really carry much actual power, particularly compared to the king or to his right hand man, Haman. Mordecai is seen as having personal expert and referent power with a contingency of visibility in the town and with the Jewish community. Haman, by contrast, has a great deal of legitimate power, both reward and coercive, which has been delegated to him by the king. The king effectively reduces his own legitimate power by being less visible and delegating so much to Haman. After identifying the various sources and contingencies, students continue by acknowledging the tactics used. There is plenty of room for personal interpretation and application while remaining true to the story, in this author's opinion. Additionally, this professor has noticed that students appreciate being able to "assess" the outcome or response of the followers. In the assignment, students are asked to state whether they believe they made good use of their power and if their behaviors were pleasing to God. This professor has found that Christian students relish this question and spend some time on it considering what would actually please God in a real leadership situation. Furthermore, students who are not believers find ways to answer the question, somewhat academically, even if their personal belief in God is not well developed.

Part II of the assignment requires students to select an individual they have observed in a position of power and influence. It is to be a contemporary, personal acquaintance. Typically, students select a boss/manager, youth minister, pastor, or coach. They are to assess that person's use of power and influence exactly as they did in the analysis of the Esther characters. That is, they analyze the chosen character's sources of power, contingencies of power, influence tactics, and followers' response. This professor finds that students "get it" in this part of the exercise. They are personally connected to that leader and can apply the concepts even more thoroughly here than with the Esther characters. Finally, students are asked to consider how the situation or outcomes could have been different if the selected character had used his or her power in another way. This question typically elicits some interesting analysis from the students as they consider alternative actions and outcomes of the chosen leader in that particular circumstance.

ASSIGNMENT ADAPTATIONS

Over the years, this author has used this assignment in varying forms, depending on the course. Most often, it is used in principles of management. However, it has also been adapted for organizational behavior class for management majors. In this upper-level course, a more thorough analysis is required of the students. Additionally, trait, behavior, contingency and transformational leadership theories are emphasized. Also, this professor has used other Old Testament characters for analysis — the story of Nehemiah and the building of the wall, for instance. One could adapt this assignment concept to other business topics, such as, decision-making, ethics, motivation, or communication. For example, this author has used the story of Jonah for a study of decision-making in principles of management.

PROFESSOR AND STUDENT RESPONSE

After using this assignment, or a variation thereof, for several semesters, this author has been pleased with it on several levels. First, as an assignment, it allows students to develop their application and analytical skills and to move into critical thinking to some extent. That is, they are expected to know content and apply theory. Then, they are to apply it further in another context. And then they are to compare and evaluate again each other against God's standards. Second, this assignment requires students to read a story from the Old Testament, which may be only vaguely familiar or even unknown. This is a way to expose them to thoughtful biblical reading. Third, this assignment satisfies my personal hope for students to practice the integration of faith and learning. Christian students gain from this exercise. But even non-Christians see the connections between Biblical content and management concepts. And finally, this assignment is consistent with my university's commitment to IFL.

Over the years, students have responded quite favorably to this assignment, usually *after* they complete it. Their insights are helpful to me as I continue to tweak the specifics of the assignment. Typical student comments include: "I never connected these Bible stories with business classes before." "I now understand Esther much better." "This assignment helps me see the business ideas better." "I've known this Bible story all my life, but I've never thought that it would show management topics."

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I offer this assignment idea as an addition to the management professor's IFL tool kit. It may prove to be especially helpful for those new to teaching in a Christian university. This paper began with Dr. McGrath's (2012) question, "A great challenge lies ahead. How can we bring our faith to the life of the academy? How can God continue to be found at Harvard? At Oxford? At wherever we have the privilege of teaching or researching?" In that same address, he continued, "Some immensely challenging and exciting times lie ahead. We need to prepare for them." Through the use of exercises like the one described in this paper, perhaps we can better accept his challenge for these times.

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APPENDIX: Principles of Management Character Study on Esther and Leadership

The purpose of this assignment is to apply contemporary leadership and influence theory to a Biblical character/situation.

Read all 10 chapters of the book of Esther in the Old Testament. Write a paper (typed, 12 font, double-spaced), which includes the following two sections.

Part I

1. List and briefly describe the power sources, contingencies, tactics and responses as described in your textbook and discussed in class.

2. Analyze Esther's use of power and influence:
Sources/types of power
Contingencies of power
Influence tactics used
The response of others to the tactics used
3. Choose one other character from the story and analyze his/her use of power and influence:
Sources/types of power
Contingencies of power
Influence tactics used
The response of others to the tactics used
4. Do you think each of them made effective use of their power and influence? What aspects of their lives and uses of power do you think was pleasing to God?

Part II

1. Describe a contemporary situation (at school, work, church, etc.) where you can see the use of power and influence in action. Describe the situation and people in the story.
2. Select ONE person in your story (above) to analyze.
Sources/types of power
Contingencies of power
Influence tactics used
The response of others to the tactics used
3. Identify specific ways in which the situation (and outcomes) could have been different if the people had used their power/influence differently.

Due Date: 11/5 (no late papers accepted)

Turn In: Assignment must be typed (12 font, double-spaced). Turn in a hard copy on or before the due date. Answer every part of every question – label your answers (Part I-1, Part I-2, Part II-1, etc.)

Grade: Assignment is worth 100 points

(Online Bible reading: www.biblegateway.com)